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Research Degree Abstract

Conceptualising Educational Quality in Kenyan Secondary Education: Comparing Local and National Perspectives

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Considerable research has highlighted the power of development agencies and the influence of international agendas in national policymaking across the Global South. In recent years, increasing critical attention has been paid to the promotion of the dominant economic and rights-based approaches to educational quality at the primary level, with some authors arguing for the reconceptualisation of educational quality in alternative and participatory ways (Tikly and Barrett, 2011). This study contributes to this literature by developing the relationship between participation and context and addresses gaps in the existing knowledge by shifting the focus to the secondary level where it is argued out-of-school factors are particularly pertinent. Kenya was one of the first African countries to extend free basic education to the secondary level with the introduction of the Free Secondary Education (FSE) policy in 2008. This is, to my knowledge, the first in-depth case study of its implementation and the associated challenges to educational quality.

The study documents local conceptualisations of quality in Kenyan secondary education and compares and contrasts these with those identified in the national FSE policy documentation. The empirical research answers three research questions: (1) how is quality defined in the Kenyan FSE policy documents? (2) what does a quality secondary education look like for a range of local stakeholders? (3) what are the main challenges facing secondary education in practice in two case study schools? Guided by a postcolonial methodological framing, the research is conducted using a two-level case study design. At the national level, thematic discourse analysis is employed to interrogate dimensions of quality in the policy documents, and at the local level, in one rural community in the Kisii region, a range of qualitative and participative methods are used to gather data on the perspectives, experiences and attitudes of teachers, students, governors and parents.

At the national level, thematic discourse analysis reveals the strong presence of global discourses underpinned by Eurocentric values with little contextualisation for Kenya. Key findings from the local level include that major challenges facing secondary education in practice are imposed from above through policy and curricular decisions. Most significantly, the size of the syllabus, together with the length of the school day and additional responsibilities in the home, is shown to lead to students sleeping as little as four hours per night. The student-generated data reveals that many also face significant out-of-school challenges related to (1) poverty and an inability to pay for essential resources, such as sanitary towels, and additional school fees; (2) an unconducive home environment, including many students doing schoolwork at night with only kerosene or candle light; (3) sex, particularly for girls and often of a risky nature; and (4) the misuse of alcohol by parents and teachers - a social issue which has not been widely noted in the

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international literature as a problem related to education. These are shown to act as barriers to their achievement of a quality education.

A framework is presented which shows a perceived quality education as one that addresses such curricular and out-of-school challenges, while promoting a quality school where good governance and discipline are particularly highlighted, and with wide-ranging outcomes. The latter was seen to be especially important in the Kenyan context where teachers, in particular, felt that too much emphasis was placed on examinations with many calling for a curriculum realignment with the original aims of the 8-4-4 system.

Conclusions point to the potential for greater democratic participation in policy formulation for educational quality and related priorities. It is argued that for such participation to be meaningful, the dominant discourses identified at the policy level need to be challenged to allow alternative ways of knowing about education to enter the quality debate. Implications at the school level primarily focus on the need for greater recognition of the impact of out-of-school factors on education. These include better guidance and counselling facilities, the availability of sanitary towels and access to alternative sources of lighting at school.

At the national level, key implications are explored for the educational policymaking process and for the potential of participation to lead to more contextualised policies and a narrowing of the gap between policy and practice. A condensation of the secondary syllabus is also recommended. Future research will seek to explore the ways in which 'free' secondary education may be reconceptualised to enable a quality and equitable education for all.

References

Tikly, L. & Barrett, A. (2011) Social justice, capabilities and the quality of education in low income countries. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 31 (1), 3–14.